

1 How English Grew

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WAS ONCE THE tongue of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who came to England across the North Sea in the fifth century A.D. Before that time, Britain had been inhabited by people who spoke a Celtic tongue, very close to present-day Welsh. The Celtic Britons, however, had been conquered by the Romans in the first century A.D., and we have every reason to believe that a great many of them spoke Latin as well as Celtic when the Anglo-Saxons arrived.

The Britons and the Anglo-Saxons did not mix very well, and neither did their languages. Anglo-Saxon on British soil therefore remained pretty much what it had been when its speakers still lived on the continent of Europe—a Germanic tongue, closely linked to what was later to become German, and even more closely related to the ancestor of present-day Dutch.

But changes were occurring all the time. For one thing, the Anglo-Saxons, while they were still on the continent of Europe, had come in contact with other Germanic tribes that had been in touch with the Romans, and from them they had acquired words like "street" and "cheese," which is how the Anglo-Saxons pronounced Latin *strata* and *caseus*. For another, the Anglo-Saxons, who had been pagans when they landed in England, were converted to Christianity. The language of the Christian Church in the western part of Europe was Latin, and this meant that additional words from that language began to filter into the speech of the Anglo-Saxons, words like "plant," "pear,"

"sack," coming from Latin *planta*, *pira*, *saccus*. The Latin of the western Church had been previously penetrated by many Greek words, because Greek was the original language of the New Testament. So many Greek words which had passed into Latin later passed on into Anglo-Saxon. Among these were "angel," which in Greek had the form *angelos* and the meaning of "messenger," and which in Latin had become *angelus*; "bishop," which comes from Greek *episcopus*, "overseer" (the bishop is the overseer of his diocese or flock); even "church" itself, which is Greek *kyriakon*, "belonging to the Lord" (the people of Scotland, who keep the old pronunciation, still say "kirk").

But besides Latin and Greek, there was another tongue that made deep inroads into the speech of the Anglo-Saxons. The Danes, whose homeland was further north than the places along the European North Sea coast where the Anglo-Saxons had come from, were great rovers and fighters. Along with their kinsmen the Norwegians and the Swedes, they formed the Scandinavian branch of the Germanic-speaking peoples—very closely related among themselves, a little more distantly to the speakers of Anglo-Saxon, German and Dutch, and much more distantly connected with the speakers of Latin, Greek and Celtic.

These Danish seafarers, or Vikings, began to make raids and settlements on the northeastern coast of England. At first the Anglo-Saxons tried to drive them back, then they decided that they might as well accept them and merge with them. The language of the Danes and that of the Anglo-Saxons were not too dissimilar, but there were some pretty important differences. These were simply merged, and the language of the Anglo-Saxons became richer thereby. It is surprising what common, everyday words in modern English are not Anglo-Saxon, but Danish. When

you say "They are ill" you are using pure Danish. When you say "Take the knife and cut the steak," the only Anglo-Saxon words you are using are "the" and "and"; the rest is Danish.

For a century or two, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Danes lived side by side, merging into an English nation that was ruled over by such men as King Alfred, a Saxon, and King Canute (it really should be spelled Cnut), a Dane. Then trouble came to England, but it was trouble that in the long run proves that "all's well that ends well."

Other Scandinavians, or Norsemen, similar to the Danes, had invaded France just as the Danes had invaded England. They had finally gotten settled in the northwestern corner of France, a region called Normandy, or land of the Northmen, after them. During the century or more that followed their settlement on French soil, they dropped their Scandinavian language and adopted French, along with French manners and customs. One Scandinavian trait they did not drop, and that was the desire to conquer and rule. About the middle of the eleventh century, their leader, William, decided that he needed broader lands to rule over, and he began to cast covetous eyes upon the large and prosperous Kingdom of England. The Anglo-Saxons and Danes, by this time, had fastened upon "English" and "England" as suitable names for themselves and their country. In 1066, Duke William of Normandy crossed the Straits of Dover and landed at Hastings with a large army, made up not only of his own Normans, but of adventurers from every part of western Europe. The Saxon king, Harold, met him in battle. The fight was long and furious, for the English were hardy and desperate in defense of their own homes. The Normans, however, had superior strategy and made better use of their forces, particularly

their archers, whose arrows played havoc in the Saxon ranks. Finally, King Harold himself fell mortally wounded, with an arrow in his eye. This was the signal for the Saxon rout and the Norman victory. William and his Normans had made themselves masters of England.

It was not so easy for the English-speaking Saxons and the French-speaking Normans to merge, as the Anglo-Saxons and Danes had merged previously. For about two centuries, the English population and the Norman overlords considered themselves separate, and each spoke his own language. Finally, the weight of numbers told. The Norman nobility gave way and adopted the English of the bulk of the population, and from about 1400 on, there was but one England, one English people, and one English language.

But we should not think that the triumph of English over French was a one-way affair. At the same time that the Norman conquerors adopted English, they put into it a tremendous number of their own French words. There is one word that you use at every turn, "very." "Very" is French, and in the form used by the Normans it was *verai*. Modern French still uses the word, in the form *vrai*, but in modern French it means "true." You can see the connection: "I am truly sorry," "I am very sorry." You might ask at this point: "What was the word the Anglo-Saxons used for 'very'?" It's a word that you still use, but in a different meaning, "sore." If you read older works of literature, you will come across such expressions as "I am sore vexed," "I am sore wroth." That is probably the way we should be using it today if the Norman Conquest had not taken place.

Or take the word "pay." This is the French *payer*, brought in by the Normans. French, by the way, had taken it from Latin *pacare*, "to appease," "to pacify," the idea

being that the best way to appease somebody, or keep him at peace, is to "pay" him off. Here again, what did the Saxons use before the coming of the Normans? Again, it's a word you use all the time, but in a different sense, "tell." Have you ever noticed that in a bank you have a paying teller and a receiving teller? Does the teller tell anything, in the modern sense? No, he counts money and pays it. He gets his name from the old Anglo-Saxon use of "tell." If you need further proof, consider that "tell" belongs to the same family of words as "toll." You know what a toll-bridge is: one where you pay to get across.

By the fourteenth century, English as we know it today was fully formed. Its first great writer was Chaucer, the author of *Canterbury Tales*. When you try to read Chaucer you encounter some difficulty, but by and large you can understand him, and you recognize his language as your own. If you take writers before Chaucer, you will have to study their language, almost as you would have to study a foreign language—say German or Dutch. What is it, then, that gives Chaucer's English its modern flavor? It's just what you would expect: the mixture of the Normans' French with the old language of the Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Once this mixture takes place, the language becomes pretty much as we know it.

Of course, it still sounds very ancient, and even funny in spots. There is an old song about the coming of summer and the singing of the cuckoo that goes back to the days of Chaucer; it starts: "Sumer is icumen in," which you can figure out, and ends: "Ne swik thu nauer nu," which you can't (it means: "Be thou not silent now").

For about two centuries after Chaucer, the language just grew and grew. It added many new words, because with the invention of printing people began to be able to read

and write in greater numbers than before, when all writing had to be done by hand, and books became more numerous. One result was that people became curious about the old languages of western civilization, Latin and Greek. As they studied them, they picked out words they fancied, gave them an English twist, and stuck them into their own writings. So we get, in addition to the Latin and Greek words adopted back in the days of King Alfred, and those brought in with the French of William the Conqueror, a large and growing number of words simply picked out of the Latin and Greek dictionaries and appropriated for English use. Consider, for instance, "bishop" and "episcopal." The first, as we saw, was the Greek word for "overseer," carried from Greek into Latin, then into Anglo-Saxon; but "episcopal" is a word that comes into the language later, in pretty much the Greek-Latin form. "Priest" was at one time the Greek *presbyter*, "elder," adopted by Latin; then, as Latin words were adopted by Anglo-Saxon, *presbyter* became *preost* and English, as time went on, made it "priest"; but in the later centuries between Chaucer and Shakespeare, they came across *presbyter* in the Greek and Latin dictionaries, adopted it all over again, and made it into "Presbyterian." Latin had a word *fragilis*, meaning "easy to break"; in French, *fragilis* turned into *frêle*, and English took it from French as "frail"; but later, seeing *fragilis* in the dictionaries, the writers decided they wanted it, and adopted it as "fragile."

These Greek and Latin words, brought in since the days of Chaucer, supply us with the more learned, literary and scientific part of our vocabulary. They are usually longer than either the native Anglo-Saxon-Danish words or the French words of the Normans, and they are usually quite close in appearance to the Latin and Greek originals. This

process of appropriating Latin and Greek words and using them for modern purposes goes on at a fast pace even today. Take words like "atom" or "anti-biotic." They are formed out of straight Greek. "Atom" is *a*, meaning "not," plus *tomos*, meaning "cut": "what you can't cut," what is indivisible; it happens to be a misnomer, for modern science has found a way to break up the atom. "Anti-biotic" is *anti*, "against," plus *bios*, "life," "what is against, or kills off, all germ life." There is really no limit or end to the number of words that can be put together on the basis of Latin and Greek roots, and this means that our vocabulary, although shaped around a hard Germanic core, gets more Greek and Latin all the time.

In the sixteenth century the greatest poet of the English language, Shakespeare, composed his many plays and works, and a very short time later the King James version of the Bible saw the light. The language of Shakespeare and the Bible, while it sounds a little ancient in spots, is thoroughly understandable to the reader of today. In fact, many present-day writers try to model their writings on the works of Shakespeare and the language of the King James Bible.

The early seventeenth century saw the English language transplanted to American shores. English was in those days a comparatively small language, with about five million speakers, fewer than those of French, German, Spanish or Italian. What gave it the impulse to become a great and widespread language was its going out to other continents, particularly America and Australia. Today, of the 250 or more million speakers of English, only 55 million or so live in the British Isles, while the United States claims three times that number.

Another effect of the movement of English speakers to

other shores was that the language, which until the beginning of the seventeenth century had grown up only in England, now began to grow up in different places and, naturally enough, in different directions. The Englishmen who went off to America or Australia found themselves in a different environment, with different objects and actions to name. These objects and actions had already been named by the people who had lived in America and Australia before them. What was more natural than for the displaced Englishmen to take these strange new words into their own language, just as the objects came into their experience? And it was just as natural for them to pass on both objects and names for them to their kinsmen back at home. So the English language began to be enriched with the words of the American Indians and the Australian natives—"squaw," "tomahawk," "wigwam" on the one hand, "boomerang," "kangaroo," "billabong" on the other.

Then the American and Australian settlers began to coin words on their own, and pass them on to their British cousins, in return for the new words that the British went on coining and passing out to the colonies. As the colonies, particularly the American ones, which became an independent nation, grew in size, population and importance, the language exchange across the oceans became greater and greater. Today, it is likely that more new words and expressions are contributed to the common language by the Americans than by the British and their Dominions. This is quite natural, because we now have nearly twice as many speakers of English as they.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially, English has been growing by leaps and bounds. It has grown in territorial extent, with new and undeveloped lands like our own former Wild West and the Australian bush be-

coming settled with English speakers. It has grown in population, with the number of speakers doubling since 1900. It has grown in power and influence, with many people of other lands and languages learning to speak English for purposes of trade, travel and culture. It has grown in richness of vocabulary and expressiveness, with thousands upon thousands of new words being added to the language's treasure house by the discoveries of science and the inventiveness of the speakers.

Today, as we write, English is a leader among the world's languages. It is officially spoken in lands covering one-fifth of the earth's surface, by populations numbering roughly one-tenth of the total population of the globe. It is widely distributed, and serves at the same time the purposes of commerce, science, culture and general communication. It has far outstripped its earlier rivals, French, Spanish, Italian, German; and even though new rivals, such as Russian, Chinese and Hindustani have appeared, they are still in no position to challenge the supremacy of English.

We must, however, remember that languages, like human beings, are not eternal. They not only are born and grow and develop. They also wither and sicken and die. The Roman living in the days of the Emperor Augustus would probably have laughed at the notion that his Latin tongue would one day become a language not popularly spoken throughout the known world. A similar fate could overtake English. In fact, it probably will. This will not be in itself a calamity, since languages have a way of leaving their own heirs and replacements behind them, just as Latin left its children, the Romance languages.

On the other hand, the decay and disappearance of the English language is a process that we, its speakers, ought not to try to hasten. We should rather wish our language

which is now in the full glory of its prime, to live on to a ripe, fruitful old age.

Is there anything we can do about this? Yes, a good deal. There is such a thing as preserving the language, keeping it from abuse and mistreatment, handling it as a dear and treasured friend rather than as something to be kicked around.

This we shall see later. But first, let us look at this language of ours as it exists today, in the many shapes that it takes on in the various parts of the world where it is spoken.